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SUBJECT: IRAN'S RAFSANJANI CALLS 1979 EMBASSY SIEGE A "MISTAKE"

CLASSIFIED BY: Ramin Asgard, Director, Iran Regional Presence  
Office, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Expediency Council Chairman Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani gave an unusual speech at Sharif University on November 23 in which he acknowledged several "mistakes" that had occurred during the early period of the Islamic Revolution, including the siege of the American Embassy, and announced that it was now possible to criticize these mistakes. Rafsanjani explicitly noted that he did not have any foreknowledge of the Embassy takeover, and went so far as to point out that both he and (now-Supreme Leader) Ali Khamenei were in Mecca together when they learned of the siege from radio reports. A former IRIG official noted to IRPO Poloff that this is the first time he has heard a member of the senior leadership in Iran criticize the attack on the Embassy. According to the source, this break with thirty years of public defense of the embassy siege could signal that Rafsanjani is trying to lay the foundation for a thaw in relations between Iran and the United States.

¶2. (SBU) During his address to the "Thirty Years of Islamic Revolution Congress," Rafsanjani went on to regret that many university professors had been purged during the early years of the Revolution. He furthered cautioned that "elites" in Iran should not be marginalized by contemporary politicians, and argued that their participation in the upcoming election is an important element to building a secure future for the Islamic Republic.

¶3. (C) Comment: Despite Rafsanjani's use of standard revolutionary language in the speech -he referred to the American Embassy as "the nest of spies" - the acknowledgement that the act itself was a mistake is notable. By pointing out that neither he nor Khamenei had any advance knowledge of the attack, and that they were outside of Iran at the time and therefore could not have participated in the decision-making process that led then-Supreme Leader Khomeini to sanction the siege after the fact, Rafsanjani is overtly distancing both himself and the Supreme Leader from the event that led to the rupture of relations between Iran and the United States.

ASGARD